

Dear Margot Lee Shetterly,

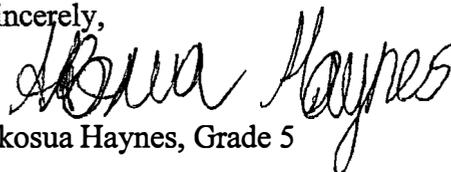
On August 21, 2017 I felt so lucky because it was the first day of school, and my friends were in class while I was watching the solar eclipse in Carbondale Illinois. When the moon had completely covered the sun, I looked up and wondered how Katherine Johnson felt when she helped John Glenn orbit the earth. Reading your book "Hidden Figures" made me more excited about becoming a NASA astronaut, but it also made me question my career choice. It scared me when I read that a fireball entered into a spaceship killing all three astronauts inside. Becoming an astronaut had been my dream, I met Mae Jemison when I was four and have dressed up as an astronaut for at least four Halloweens, but I didn't want to die in a ball of flames.

I finished your book on the train ride back from Carbondale just five days before my "Hidden Figures" themed 10th birthday party. I made up a rule, and told my friends that if they wanted to come they had to read at least two thirds of your book so that we could have an interesting discussion. I asked everyone to share their favorite passage. When it was my turn everyone read my selection, on page 217, aloud. Learning that John Glenn trusted Katherine Johnson with his life, because of her superior math skills, motivated me to take my own math homework more seriously. I love math but some of my friends don't. I wanted them to read your book to see the magic in math and how useful it can be. Right before my party I looked up the definition for analytic geometry because Katherine used it to calculate the trajectory of John Glenn's Mercury capsule - useful magic!

Although John Glenn respected Katherine Johnson, they lived in two different worlds. When I read about the discrimination that Katherine, and the computers had to put up with (people not trusting them and separate bathrooms), it made me think what it would have been like to live in the Jim Crow time period. I asked myself if I would have been able to work so well under pressure. I felt proud of Ms. Johnson.

There are many more opportunities for African Americans today because of what Katherine Johnson and the other computers accomplished. They blazed a path for the next generation. My friends thanked me for choosing your book to celebrate my birthday. I know that I can still be an astronaut, an astrophysicist, or have a space career on earth!

Sincerely,



Akosua Haynes, Grade 5

Dear Gabrielle Zevin,

I read your book for an assignment in school. My teacher meant for us to learn a lesson, write a paragraph, and move on. But my mind is still in Elsewhere. When Liz wakes up and finds herself on a boat, she is told by a strange man she was hit by a car and died. He said they were taking her to a place called Elsewhere. Once they arrived, she would begin to age backwards until all her memories were lost. As a baby, Liz would be sent back to Earth to live a new life, a life that wasn't hers. He said her life was taken by a yellow taxi and she could never go back. Liz couldn't believe her life was over. Looking back on her life she realized how precious it had been and how much time she'd wasted.

I could relate to Liz because I knew what it was like to complain and cry about things that would not matter in the next hour. Being a kid makes you want, what you want, when you want it. But that view clouded all the wonderful things I needed to be grateful for. Yet, the lesson people learn time and time again tends to be realized too late.

One night my siblings and parents were in the living room watching our favorite show. A commercial came on so I got up to make cookies in the kitchen. Then my oldest sister, Sydney, started whispering, "Mom? Mom?" No answer. I looked over to see my dad standing over a shaking body. "I'm calling 911!" She had had an aneurysm and wasn't waking up. I spent those few days in that hospital room listing all the things I did wrong and what I would change once she woke up. She never did.

My mom was very outgoing and succeeded in making friends with pretty much everyone she met. The hospital filled with people I knew, people I pretended to know, and extended family. Being only 11, everyone smothered me with questions and somber nods. Whenever somebody asked me how I was feeling I smiled and said, "If this was her time, then it is her time." It wasn't until she was in a casket that I realized it really *was* her time. I was kind of playing the part of strong and accepting without expecting her to really die. There was no way I was supposed to really grow up without a mom. No way.

I spoke at her funeral and put on a smile. I told all the concerned family friends, "If it was her time, then let it be." I fooled myself into pretending things were just fine. Unlike Liz, my first response was to be okay. Everyone deals with death and everyone gets through it, I can too, right? Before I knew it, junior high was about to begin. Even though I didn't say it, seventh grade seemed pretty scary. I was excited for more teachers and a locker, but now I had to get through it on my own. But when I read your book, life got brighter.

Liz tortured herself by going to the observation decks to see her old life everyday. She sat

there watching her best friend being happy without her. She watched everyone move on. Everyone except Liz. I didn't want that happen to me. I didn't want to become a ghost person living in the past. For my birthday a few weeks later, I got a little book of positive quotes. It inspired me to write one thing I was thankful for everyday. Not the typical things like family and friends, but things like clean water and good teachers. My dad tried putting me in different support groups that I saw no need for. After deciding I wasn't totally fine though, we went to one on one therapy sessions that helped me a lot, but only because I was willing to work for it.

One thing that really stuck with me was your theme of acceptance. Liz took some time learning how to move on from the life she used to know. She became obsessed with the observation decks where she could observe her friends and family back on Earth. She was stuck. Thandi, her roommate, had no problem at all. From the start she said there was no point being sad at what she couldn't change. I read that, wishing my heart could catch up like Thandi's did in two pages. But everyone takes their own time to keep their mind and soul in sync. Knowing that my mom wasn't coming back home was difficult to even imagine. I had to accept that life would go on without her, but only if I moved on.

You wrote "Death is a state of mind---many people on Earth spend their entire lives dead." I wanted to live my life and not wait for it to be over. December 16th will mark one year since my mom's death. Just like Liz aged backward in your book, my mom would be one year younger and one year closer to home. Thank you for a world where my own mother can see me writing this letter from an observation deck. Thank you for the idea that once I leave this world, I will return. Thank you for the lessons I couldn't live without, and the book I won't forget.

With heart,

Rylee Johnson grade 7

Dear Dorothea Goldenberg and Bette Killion,

My mother, a very strong and hopeful woman, went through surgery just days after the doctors found the cancer cells. She stayed strong through surgery as well as the chemotherapy and radiation that followed. She fought her illness everyday for almost two years and never once allowed others to see that her faith began to waiver. Throughout those two years that Mom fought breast cancer, we all faced the difficulties that came along with her fight. I wanted to support Mom and Dad around the house; but, for the most part I stayed out of the house, keeping myself busy with clubs and sports to stay away from the house, as it did not feel real. How could my mother have gotten this horrible sickness? What could a scared, little girl do to help her sick mother? I felt like the loving little Velveteen Rabbit who asked what he do to help his boy fight scarlet fever?

After two horrible years, Momma slowly began feeling like herself again. For about six months, my life seemed to slowly be adjusting back to normal. Mom had survived a two year battle with breast cancer and still appeared as strong as ever, just as Jon recovered from scarlet fever and the Velveteen Rabbit assumed his life would return to its previous glory. Then, just as the Doctor spotted the Velveteen Rabbit, demanding the Rabbit be taken away, my life seemed to be taken away from me.

Only six months after being declared cancer free, only six months after my mother's battle ended, only six months of feeling like her old self, she was diagnosed with stage 4 bone cancer, something people do not survive. Even after hearing this news, my courageous and strong-willed mother still believed she could beat cancer and survive once again.

After only a year and a half of fighting bone cancer and going through the whole process of chemo and radiation again, my beautiful mother passed away, late the night of June 23, 2016.

A few months after my mother's death, I picked up *The Velveteen Rabbit*, searching for comfort the story changed for me. It was no longer simply about a rabbit becoming real. In that moment, I understood the hidden meaning behind the fairytale.

After being discarded, Velveteen Rabbit shed a single tear and from that the Nursery Fairy appeared. Only after the Velveteen Rabbit's fur had worn away, after Jon became sick, after the Velveteen Rabbit was doomed to a life as a forgotten rabbit, did the love that Jon had for him allow the Velveteen Rabbit to become real.

That love changed the Velveteen Rabbit's life as he catapulted from depression to joy. Unlike the little rabbit's sudden transformation, mine will take much longer. However your fairytale about a little rabbit's change has opened my eyes about my own, new new found depression. Having watched my world crumble around me for almost five years, it's impossible not to feel empty. When my tears begin to fall, there is no little fairy to wipe my eyes, there is no sudden transformation for me, there is no fairy to fix my feelings. However, there is the Velveteen Rabbit, who learned to endure through hope.

I have come to terms with this low place I'm currently at. Although I often feel empty from the loss of my mother. I am slowly learning that I will come back, broken into a new life. I must learn to live without my mother physically by my side. Your book assured me, I can do this, one day at a time.

I have reached the point of "broken" and the only thing I can do now is heal. I am slowly learning that it is okay to be what people would call broken and that is the first step to becoming "real." Your little rabbit taught me a crucial lesson. Before you can become "real" you must experience a place of pure pain. A heartache so strong, it forces you to become stronger to survive. Your fairytale helped guide me to that needed mindset to grow from a world-stopping loss. I understood, more importantly, I felt as if someone understood my pain.

I never would have imagined a vulnerable rabbit would be my biggest inspiration to keep living without my beautiful mother at my side. It is acceptable to love someone so much, that losing them creates an empty, dull feeling. Being in a dangerously low place of mourning is acceptable as long as you do not let those feelings and thoughts destroy you. I may not have a little fairy to wipe my eyes and save me. Though I do have my family and friends that refuse to let me sink any lower into my depression. What keeps me going, what keeps me living.

The Velveteen Rabbit could not imagine a life after the trash pile, there was no where else to go. Until there was. After losing my momma, I did not see a reason to keep going. All I desired was to be at her side. There was no where else I wanted to be, there was no where else to go. I made up my mind. I could not physically live without her. Although, it was not a little fairy saving me, my family saved me. I am still fighting the urge to be with my momma but it is slowly becoming a weaker thought as they show me happiness again.

The love I have for her, ended up breaking me into thousands of pieces but the love she felt for me only saved me from myself. It would simply destroy her, knowing the pain I feel. Momma would want me to be strong and live the life she never had. All the hopes and dreams she had for me, is the reason behind my fighting. She is the reason behind my pain and my survival. Momma inspires me to continue living, for her.

Your book showed me that even though my momma and I now inhabit worlds that will keep us apart, just as Jon and the Velveteen Rabbit must live separately once the Velveteen Rabbit became real.

Thank You,
Sakura Fagan